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THE OFFENSE OF THE CROSS

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I Cor. 1:23, 24: "Christ crucified . . . the power of God and the wisdom of God."

The Incarnation was God's way of stating himself to the man in the street. The life of Jesus was the life of God in terms of flesh and blood and under the conditions of time and space. It was the eternal Wisdom translated into the idiom of history; the ultimate moral order focused down to the dimensions of a single life. It was the perfect righteousness rendered "in littleness that suits of our faculty." And just because it was the divine life in the habit of our humanity, the life of Jesus becomes the type and manner of life to which the children of God are called and predestined to be conformed.

Of this life the inevitable issue in a hostile and contumacious world was the Cross. Calvary was the crown and climax of the divine way of life among men who misunderstood and hated it. The tragedy of the Cross shows the essential and eternal contradiction between the way of worldly wisdom and the divine order; between these is a great gulf fixed which is to be bridged by no compromise. And worldly wisdom could devise no way of dealing with the divine manner of life but that of extinguishing it. This contradiction which reaches its highest point in the Cross we may indeed trace throughout the whole life of Jesus. Into a world which worships power, he came in the weakness of a little peasant child. In a world which

worships greatness, he humbled himself and consorted with the lowly; in a world which measures a man's life by the multitude of the things he possesseth, he had not where to lay his head; in a world which judges the worth of men by outward standards of respectability, he sought out the disreputable and befriended the publican and the harlot. His behavior was a bewilderment to his kinsfolk, his teaching a continual perplexity to his critics. At every step he seems to challenge the conventions and orthodoxies of his people and of his age. Yet, if he was a rebel, he was a rebel in spite of himself. For these sharp contrasts sprang from no planned perversity, from no calculated contrariety. They were the consequences of living out the divine life directly and unaffectedly in the world of men. Jesus contradicted the current acceptances of his generation simply by being true to himself through everything. And to all this there could be no end save the Cross.

In history the Cross has been followed by the same quality of misunderstanding and criticism as that which Jesus encountered in his life. When Paul preached it in the open world, he found it to be a stumbling-block to the Jew and a laughing-stock to the Greek. One has only to recall the religious and intellectual ancestry of the mixed population of the Mediterranean seaboard in the Apostolic Age to realize how sharply and completely the Cross cut across all

the accepted traditions of thought and worship. So it has been since. From Celsus to Nietzsche and Bernard Shaw (who has said that "the central superstition of Christianity is salvation by the gibbet") there has been a long succession of men to whom the Cross has served no other than a tragic folly, an outrage upon reason and good sense. On the other hand, from Paul's day to ours, there has been an unbroken continuity of conviction that the Cross is the power and the wisdom of God. To the former, it is the supreme illusion; to the latter, the sovereign and ultimate reality. To the former, it has been less than nothing at all; to the latter, it has been everything—the spring of hope, the ground of joy, the gateway of real and abiding life.

It would take us too far afield to inquire into the sources of this deep divergence of judgment concerning the Cross. Essentially, it is the conflict between the wisdom of this world and the wisdom of God which the world still deems folly. The challenge of the Cross still remains, and as ever it cleaves the world of men deeply into two opposing judgments. A modern mystic, John Cordelier, says that "the Cross is the ground plan of the universe"; and it is required of us that we make up our minds whether it be indeed the revelation of an ultimate moral order which cannot be repealed and from which no appeal is possible. Is it true that by the Cross we must stand or fall, and the world be saved or lost? Shall we stake our lives and our world upon the doctrine of the superman or the gospel of the Son of Man? That is the main, indeed the sole, question which we have to

answer decisively in these dark days; and standing amid the smoking ruins of a civilization which has carried through to its issue the logic of worldly wisdom, can we return any answer but that the wisdom of this world has shown itself to be the tragic folly it really is and that there is no hope of healing for this stricken race but in that foolishness of God which it has denied?

It would be idle in the course of a single session to attempt even a summary of the whole significance of the Cross. For it is the convergence of two movements—of God to man, of man to God. Man in the person of Jesus offered to God the sacrifice of a perfect, willing obedience; God in the person of Jesus offered to man the free gift of a perfect forgiveness. Man at his manliest, God at his divinest, meet in one and the same act. The high watermark of human achievement and the deepest divine condescension, the ultimate truth of the life of man, the last truth of the life of God—they are all here in this one supreme event. Dr. Fairbairn said—years ago—"Calvary is an epitome of the world." It is more, the epitome of two worlds—of God's and of man's. It is the whole of life—human and divine—focused down to a flaming point of light. Everything is in it. And when one bids you believe that this or that is the interpretation of the Cross, believe him; yet when he says that this or that is the only interpretation, then believe him not. Every theory of the Cross, every doctrine of the atonement by which men have been enabled to live and to die, has its own measure of the truth; and the Cross is greater than anything we can say about it. There is room in the Cross

for all the truth in all the theories and all the interpretations that men have formulated concerning it—and still there is room.

When Stewart McAlister was excavating the mound of Gezer, he did not uncover the whole hill. He dug a deep trench across it; and, as the trench sank down through the layers of débris and litter that each successive age had left behind it, he was able to reconstruct in outline the history of the various civilizations that had inhabited the mound. And all that men may ever hope to do is to dig a trench across the hill of Calvary; yet no man so doing shall fail to find enough to live by and to die by. Let us endeavor to dig a trench, then, that mayhap will bring us near to the center of the truth of the gospel.

I

Every religion in the world starts out with the assumption that there is something wrong with the world. In this they all agree; but they do not agree in their diagnosis of the trouble. Christianity says that the trouble is sin; and by sin it means alienation from God. To this root it traces the whole age-long moral tragedy of the world, and it professes to propound God's remedy for the trouble. This remedy it describes in two great words: "redemption" and "reconciliation." These are not words which have been much in fashion in our time. The modern catchword has been "progress"; and as the result of the pressure of the doctrine of evolution upon us we have come to suppose that there is an inherent bias to improvement in the world. There is an inevitable moral progression, a push from behind in

human affairs which is going to bring us back at last to the Golden Age. We are traveling gradually and steadily up an inclined plane to the City of God; and Christianity is regarded as a gentle stimulant to this splendid cosmic climb. But the jolt which the world has had in these last three years is compelling us to reconsider this satisfying philosophy. It simply does not work. One does not deny the truth of evolution by saying that it is only true within limits in history and morals. What the present tragedy in which the whole world is engulfed means is that there is radical dislocation which needs to be readjusted. The formula of progress does not cover the ground, and soon or late the world must come back to the Christian view of the need of that fundamental readjustment which it calls redemption. The way and word of redemption it will find in the Cross. For the Cross is the revelation of the reaction of the moral nature of God to the moral tragedy of the world, of God's way of solving the moral problem of the world.

The uniqueness of God's way—which is the primary offense of the Cross—we may perhaps best see by comparing it with our human way of solving moral problems. Take that moral problem which is nearest in its essence to what is called sin—namely, *crime*. In our accepted penal method there are two processes—judgment and punishment. First of all, we ascertain the fact and determine the measure of guilt; then we affix and impose a commensurate penalty. There is no question that this method secures to society a certain measure of immunity from the exploits of the criminal, and to some small

extent it acts as a deterrent upon evil men. But certainly the one thing we have not succeeded in doing, in spite of all our emphasis upon the remedial quality of our penal methods, is to solve the moral problem involved in crime. For we do one of two things. Either we break the criminal's spirit and turn him into a slouching parasite or we harden him and make him a greater menace to society than he was before. These are the two characteristic results of our modern penal system. So far from solving, we have succeeded only in aggravating, the moral problem. And one sign of the admitted bankruptcy of our traditional penology is the new spirit in the treatment of the criminal which is making some way among us in these days. Virtually it means that we are turning from the obvious way of worldly wisdom to God's way of addressing himself to the solution of the moral problem of mankind.

And that way, what is it? Like the human way, it begins in judgment. God only deals with us on a basis of absolute moral reality, and the first thing he does with us is to tell us the bare moral truth about ourselves. This he does by way of the Cross.

First of all, because the Cross is the achievement of flesh and blood, it is a concrete statement of *our* moral liability as free responsible souls. It embodies the nature of God's moral demand upon us. No man can look understandingly upon the Cross and be confronted with this demand without realizing himself to be wholly and hopelessly bankrupt. Put to that test, he has to acknowledge an irreparable insolvency.

But that is not all. He realizes that sin is something more than moral defeat and failure. It is a perversion and a misdirection of personality, a pragmatic opposition to the ultimate moral order, the "righteousness" which God declared at that time. He knows sin—his sin—to be an affair between persons, to be self-assertion as against God.

If God were to deal with us on our own principles he surely would discard us forever and leave sin to work out its characteristic consequences to the end. But at this point another element enters into the argument—namely, God's own estimate of our worth. That is, of course, written broad and deep over the face of the New Testament. You have it in John 3:16 and a hundred other places. Rightly or wrongly, the New Testament holds that God thought us of so much worth that he gave so that even he could not give more, in order to save us. And God's estimate of our human worth is unaffected by any of those considerations which so profoundly influence our judgments upon men. For, to begin with, it takes no account of any of those surface variations of race, color, social standing, or culture which weigh so much with us.

The rank is but the guinea stamp,
The man's the man for a' that—

to God before it was so to Robert Burns. And further, a man's moral condition does not modify God's evaluation of him. We instinctively relegate the drunkard, the harlot, to a sort of subhuman category. Not so God. While we were yet *sinners*, Christ died for us; while we were yet *enemies*, we were reconciled to God by the death of the Cross.

And so God, being unable to discard us and not willing to coerce us, seeks to *win* us back to himself. Not that sin is not punished. No sin ever escapes punishment. What a man sows, that shall he surely reap. But sin is not punished by a stated divine decree. There is nothing penal about it. There is a law of moral gravitation, of moral continuity, which secures that every transgression and disobedience shall receive its due recompense of reward. But this is a general device for government and not a specific organ of redemption. To bring man back to himself, God's method is forgiveness. The sin goes on to ripen its own peculiar fruit; but God reaches out to the sinner in love. You have it all in that tense moment on the Cross when Jesus looking down upon the multitude, agent and symbol of the great world's sin, says, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." That is the characteristic divine word uttered through human lips above the tumultuous clamor of the moment and persisting down the ages as the supreme utterance of history—the promise of a forgiveness, freely and royally given without money and without price, unmerited and unrequitable. God's punishment is pardon; God's vengeance is forgiveness; God's revenge is redemption. Our way is to break men's wills; God's way is to break men's hearts. Our way is coercion; God's way is conversion. That is the intolerable retribution of love.

II

What then shall we say to these things? I said as I began that the way of life revealed in Jesus Christ repre-

sents the type of life to which every child of God is called to be conformed; and what I especially desire to emphasize is that the Cross is not only the assurance of God's forgiveness, but the ground of the Christian ethic. If we accept the gifts that the Cross brings, we must needs accept it in its demands as well. And the Cross and nothing else is normative of Christian conduct. We speak of the Golden Rule as though that defined the quality of Christian behavior; but it is to be observed that Jesus did not call that the gospel, but "the Law and the Prophets"—the highest point of ethical perception which the world had up to that time reached. Jesus carries the rule much further. With him it was not that we should do to others as we would that others should do unto us, but that we should do to others *as God has done to us*. "Love your enemies; do good to them that despitefully use you—that you may be the children of your Father." Who does these indiscriminating things? "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another," says St. Paul, "*as God in Christ forgave you*." "Love one another," says St. John, "*as God hath loved you*."

The Cross stands essentially for a social process. Traditional evangelicalism has too frequently insisted upon its character as an escape for the individual, and has failed to grasp its real significance as the symbol of reconciliation. Salvation is being brought into fellowship with God; redemption is an organ of unification, the antithesis of the alienation which is sin. And that same principle is to govern men in their relations with one another. Indeed, Jesus makes

it perfectly clear that fellowship with God is contingent upon fellowship with man. "Except ye forgive men their trespasses, neither will your heavenly Father forgive you your trespasses." "Go, first be reconciled to thy brother, then come and offer thy gift." The essential nature of love as it is described in the New Testament is that of an active energy of social cohesion—working out in forgiveness and restitution, in friendship and fellowship, in mutual service and sacrifice. The Cross is the background of the Christian ethic. The Christian life is a life which must be redemptive and reconciliatory in all its reactions. The Christian is in the world to overcome alienations and divisions and to be the living nucleus of a redeemed society.

Hence he must start with God's evaluation of man. That must be the fixed point for all his social thinking and his social practice. Somehow we must regain the Pauline "passion for souls," that sense of their utter pricelessness which cried out in him:

Only as souls, I see the folk thereunder
Bound who should conquer, slaves who
should be kings,

and constrained him to be and to do all that Frederic Myers put into his mouth:

Then with a thrill the intolerable craving
Shivers through me like a trumpet call.
Oh to save these, to perish for their saving,
Die for their life and be offered for them all—

Indeed only some such vehemence of passion can avail this stricken world today—a passion that will see in every man a priceless soul for which Christ died, to be redeemed to his inheritance of freedom and kingliness. That we should see men with God's eyes as personalities to be bound to him and to ourselves in the irrefragable bonds of a love which shall be true to itself through everything—which shall like God's love not differentiate between kinsman and enemy, but go forth to create fellowship at whatever sacrifice—this is surely this broken, sundered world's need in this dark hour. It cries aloud for the Christian who will make his Master's words his own: "Him that cometh to me—whoever he be, tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief—him that cometh to me, I will in no wise cast out." And that is for him the practice of the Cross.